



Golden Nightjar *Caprimulgus eximius*, Yang Yang, Northern Senegal (Michael K Poulsen)
Engoulevent doré *Caprimulgus eximius*, Yang Yang, Sénégal du nord (Michael K Poulsen)



Pitta-like Ground-roller *Atelornis pittoides*, Ranomafana, Madagascar (Pete Morris)
Brachyptérolle pittuide *Atelornis pittoides*, Ranomafana, Madagascar (Pete Morris)



Crossley's Ground-roller *Atelornis crossleyi*, Madagascar (Frank Hawkins)
Brachyptérolle de Crossley Atelornis crossleyi, Madagascar (Frank Hawkins)



Long-tailed Ground-roller *Uratelornis chimaera*,
 near Ifaty, Madagascar (Pete Morris)
Brachyptérolle à longue queue Uratelornis chimaera,
près de Ifaty, Madagascar (Pete Morris)



Short-legged Ground-roller *Brachypteracias leptosomus*,
 Vohiprana, Madagascar (Pete Morris)
Brachyptérolle leptosome Brachypteracias leptosomus,
Vohiprana, Madagascar (Pete Morris)

Photospot: Golden Nightjar *Caprimulgus eximius*

Nigel Cleere

This uniquely coloured nightjar must surely rank as one of the most beautiful of all birds. A desert species, it is found discontinuously throughout the Sahel. Occurring from southern Mauritania and northern Senegal, through central and eastern Mali, southern and south-eastern Niger, and central Chad to central parts of Sudan, it has also been recorded as a vagrant in the extreme south-west of Morocco. Golden Nightjar prefers gravelly terrain with scattered stones and clumps of vegetation, but it is also found on sandy or more rocky soils.

Sitting or roosting birds appear quite large-headed, but it is only a small to medium-sized nightjar (22-24 cm). Its

rich tawny or tawny buff upperparts are covered in greyish-white rectangular spots which are edged and densely speckled dark brown. These markings effectively break up the birds' shape and plumage and, especially when they are hidden away in dappled shade, help to prevent detection at roost sites. Both sexes have very large white throat patches, large white wing patches and broad white tips to the outer two pairs of tail feathers. They have a rather ghostly pale appearance when seen in poor or artificial light.

Golden Nightjars have a rather deep, evenly pitched *churr*, lasting up to two minutes or more without pause. In

common with other desert nightjars, they sing from the ground. Breeding probably takes place from March to May. Two greyish-white, heavily blotched eggs are laid on the ground, usually close to vegetation such as a clump of grass. Golden Nightjars feed on grasshoppers, mantises, bugs and beetles, and may take moths and other insects.

Even though Golden Nightjars can be fairly common, they are rarely seen and remain poorly known: a real challenge to anyone birding in the Sahel. ☺

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Photospot: Ground-rollers of Madagascar

Roger Safford

Africa and its islands have no shortage of near-mythical birds. Some, like Congo Peacock *Afropavo congensis*, seem set to remain so for a good few years yet, but for others, the clouds of mystery are lifting. This process often starts with the realisation that it is possible for visitors to go and see the near-myth, but it is usually many more years before much gets learnt about the birds' ecology. The ground-rollers of Madagascar are a case in point. They are usually terrestrial, silent, shy, skulking and elusive. However, at times they are none of these things, and to the lucky observer in the right place at the right time, they are extremely beautiful birds. The rainforest species, lurking in deep shade, do not often reveal their true colours, but a close view, with eyes accustomed to the dim light, reveals an unexpected array of turquoises, indigos, purples and reds, and even brightly coloured bare parts. Close encounters with these birds are among the most treasured ornithological experiences.

Most taxonomists place the five species of ground-rollers in their own family, Brachypteraciidae, endemic to

Madagascar, although some lumpers have made them a subfamily of the rollers Coraciidae. In fact, no taxonomic study has rigorously examined the group; even Sibley and colleagues, lacking DNA from any species, could reach no firm conclusion. All do, however, agree that there are five species in three genera. Four species (in two genera) are restricted to humid evergreen forest, with the remaining monotypic genus in the arid, spiny forest of the south-west.

All species nest as solitary pairs in holes in the ground (usually in a slope or embankment), excavated by the birds, like bee-eaters and many kingfishers, but unlike the true rollers, whose nest cavities are rarely in the ground, and never excavated by the birds themselves. They are largely terrestrial, but often ascend to a horizontal branch to sing. Their songs consist of far-carrying hoots, which may reveal them to be common in areas where observers otherwise find no trace of their presence; they seem only to call in the breeding season, and searching for them during the southern winter is often fruitless. Food items are mostly inverte-

brates, small reptiles and frogs.

The Pitta-like Ground-roller *Atelornis pittoides* is the most widespread species, quite commonly seen and heard during November around the main trail system at Ranomafana National Park. It is the only species to have been found on Montagne d'Ambre, an isolated rainforest in the far north, and in the north-western Sambirano region, and has even occurred off the mainland, on Nosy Mangabe in the north-east. Its congener, the Rufous-headed (or Crossley's) Ground-roller *A. crossleyi*, is absent from these outlying areas, but locally common in parts of Ranomafana National Park and at Maromiza, an area close to, but slightly higher than, the famous Périnet (Analamazaotra) Special Reserve. It has been claimed that it occurs at sea level, but all documented records seem to come from above about 900 m, suggesting that it is a montane species; any lowland records need to be reported in full (and the pages of *Bull. ABC* are available for such records).

The larger rainforest ground-rollers comprise the genus *Brachypteracias*. The Short-legged Ground-roller *B. leptosomus* has been widely recorded in

recent surveys of eastern rainforest areas. It is often seen perched in a tree, but prey is usually picked from the ground. At Marojejy Strict Nature Reserve in August to October 1988, 27 sightings of this species were all at altitudes below 1,000 m, despite considerable effort above this level. This suggests a preference for low to mid altitudes, although the upper limit clearly varies geographically. Perhaps the most bizarre of the rainforest species is the Scaly Ground-roller *B. squamiger*. Its superbly scaled pattern, with shades of bronze, green and rufous, contrasts quite unexpectedly with bright pink legs and (unfeathered) eye patch, and sky-blue tail tip. It is highly terrestrial, running and stopping, rummaging in leaf litter or pulling up earthworms, and disappearing with ease in tangled rainforest undergrowth. This, too, seems to be a lowland species, best known from the Masoala Peninsula, but it occurs patchily as far as the extreme south-east (and in Mantady National Park, close to Périnet). The fifth species, the Long-tailed

Ground-roller *Uratelornis chimaera*, is restricted to a small portion of the south-western spiny forest, north of the town of Toliara. The bird behaves fairly like the *Atelornis* species, but is rather easier to see in its more open habitat, raising and lowering its tail like a gigantic prinia. Its habitat is unprotected and threatened with destruction and degradation, making this species and the equally extraordinary Subdesert Mesite *Montias benschi* (restricted to the same area) among the highest priorities for bird conservation in the Afrotropics. Their best-known haunt, near Ifaty, is becoming terribly degraded by wood extraction, mainly for charcoal production. The extent of such degradation, and its effect on the birds, are urgent topics for investigation.

How rare and threatened are these birds? The rainforest species are increasingly widely recorded, but mostly in undisturbed forest. They certainly occur at high density in some places, but have not been found in others. Thus, they seem to be patchily distributed

within their preferred habitat zone, as are many tropical forest birds. This makes risk assessment very difficult, but more surveys are being undertaken annually and casual observations can certainly add to knowledge. Here, therefore, are five good reasons to visit Madagascar; the visitor will find many more!

Acknowledgments

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Photospot: Sharpe's Longclaw *Macronyx sharpei*

John H. Fanshawe

Being rather large of foot, I am especially fond and sympathetic towards longclaws. With their perilous peregrinating over the tangled turf, it seems that nature has handicapped them unfairly. In truth, however, long hind claws are adaptations for coping better with the tussocky grass which is their preferred habitat. Eight species of longclaws are recognised and they are confined to Africa, although they do look remarkably like the meadowlarks of the New World (*Sturnella*, Icteridae), a fascinating example of convergent evolution¹. All are characterised by cryptic, well-patterned backs, and striking red, yellow or orange underparts.

Longclaws have a rather perky upright stance and perform short jerky flights (often onto low bushes) during which they reveal bright white outer tail feathers. On the basis of plumage, habits and song, most authorities consider Sharpe's Longclaw to be in the genus *Macronyx*^{1,2}. It is probably the closest to the true pipits of the longclaws and,

along with the Yellow-breasted Pipit *Anthus chloris*, has been placed in *Hemimacronyx* by some authors^{3,4} (and has been called Kenyan Yellow-breasted Pipit too⁵).

Listed as a candidate species in the Red Data Book⁵, Sharpe's Longclaw is considered to be near-threatened in the most recent assessment, *Birds to Watch* 2⁶. It is undoubtedly a bird of limited range, being confined to the montane grasslands from 2,000-3,400 m in west and central Kenya, from Mount Elgon (where it has been proposed as a possible contender for the Ugandan side as well), to both sides of the Rift Valley including the Mau and Kinangop plateaux and both the Aberdares and Mount Kenya^{1,7}.

In common with other longclaws, Sharpe's can be hard to spot when its back is turned, with its upperparts blending with the vegetation. As Dave Cottridge's photos reveal, it is only when the bird turns front-on that the bright yellow can be seen. Sharpe's is the smallest longclaw and lacks a black

necklace (Grimwood's is the only other necklace-less species). Confusion is only likely, with Yellow-throated *Macronyx croceus*, but it is largely allopatric, occurring at lower altitudes than Sharpe's, so there should be no chance of overlap^{1,7}. Yellow-throated is also larger, has a black necklace, and significantly more white in the tail. Two other species occur in Kenya. Rosy-breasted *Macronyx ameliae*, which has a pretty pink throat, inhabits damp grassland in the south-west (including the Mara). Pangani *Macronyx aurantiigula* occurs in the south-east and largely prefers drier country.

The ecology and behaviour of Sharpe's Longclaw is not well known. Often found in pairs or small family groups, they are rather retiring, although easier to approach when the weather is cold or windy (which it very often is in the Kenya highlands!).¹ The sexes are similar, but the male is generally more clearly marked and brighter yellow below.